

Free California of Fossil Fuels

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Highlight: It's essential for legislators and Governor Brown to commit the state to running on 100 percent clean energy by 2045.

Body

MIDDLEBURY, Vt. — For generations — maybe since the gold rush — California has been where our dreams gather, the Elysian coast where palm trees sway in the ocean breeze and entire industries rise to sate our fantasies and our appetites. A bite of an orange is endless summer.

Now, in this scariest of seasons, California is also where our nightmares collect. At the moment, the largest fire in the state's history burns out of control; Yosemite Valley is closed indefinitely because flames lick at its access roads; and Death Valley has just registered, for the second straight year, the hottest month in American history. Meteorologists are scrambling to make sense of a so-called fire tornado that lifted 39,000 feet from the fire that burned near the edges of the city of Redding, twirling for more than an hour and stripping the bark from trees.

Ever since a record drought began near the start of the decade, a mild dread has hung over the state; now, you can see the smoke from San Diego to Lake Tahoe. Even the Pacific offers less relief — ocean temperatures are at a record high, and in any event, a federal government analysis last year warned that up to two-thirds of the state's southern beaches may disappear as the sea rises this century.

Like in most places, California's troubles are made more acute by Washington's descent into ideological delusions. President Trump is trying to revoke the state's longtime authority to regulate automobile emissions within its borders even as he tweets nonsensically about the region's hydrology.

But the most basic decisions about the state's future will be made in Sacramento, many of them by the end of the legislative session on Aug. 31, and those decisions could help steer a rudderless world through the gathering climate storm.

The State Senate passed a measure last year that would commit California, the world's fifth-largest economy, to running on 100 percent clean energy by 2045. Now it is up to the Assembly to provide crucial leadership by passing that legislation, S.B. 100. If any place on earth can handle this transition, it's California, home to some of the planet's strongest sunshine and many of its finest clean-tech entrepreneurs.

Already, thanks to strong efforts at efficiency and conservation and the falling price of solar power, the average California household spends almost 50 percent less on energy than the average family in, say, Louisiana. But unless the Assembly passes S.B. 100 before the current session ends, much of that momentum will evaporate. After great organizing (including from my colleagues at 350.org chapters across the state), 72 percent of Californians back the bill; it's now a test of confidence versus cravenness for members of the Assembly.

The governor, Jerry Brown, has been strangely quiet on S.B. 100, which is odd since it should be the no-brainer capstone to his clean-energy endeavors. After the governor's years of leading efforts to deal with the demand side

of the energy equation, activists are now also demanding he show equal attention to the supply side. His administration routinely grants new permits for oil and gas drilling, leading not only to more carbon emissions but also to drill rigs and derricks next to the houses, schools and hospitals of the state's poorest residents: From rural Kern County to south-central Los Angeles, nearly 70 percent of the people living near wells are minorities.

So far, Mr. Brown has not stood up to the oil industry. He's not alone, of course — very few leaders have shown this kind of courage. (In Canada, the theoretical climate champion Justin Trudeau recently nationalized a pipeline in order to make sure that the exploitation of Alberta's dirty tar sands could continue.) But Mr. Brown is term-limited, not to mention 80 years old; he'll never run for office again, so like no other leader, he could resist the financial might of the fossil fuel industry. In the end, it's how he will be judged by history.

And in the end, it's up to the rest of us to ensure that he, and the California Legislature and leaders everywhere, do the right thing. A large movement of citizens is the only power that can match the financial majesty of the oil industry, and that movement is focused on California for the rest of this summer. Mr. Brown has summoned city and state leaders from around the planet for a climate meeting in mid-September, but before they gather, ordinary people will make their voices heard on Sept. 8. The group Rise for Climate, Jobs and Justice will sponsor rallies around the world, but the biggest is expected to be in the Bay Area, where marchers will try to spur action on a scale equal to the danger.

The atmosphere in the streets of San Francisco will reflect the new California: full of the confidence bred by technological prowess, but full, too, of the dread that comes from watching people die from wildfire, and of the anger that comes from watching leaders talk more than they act. California has long played an outsize role in the world's affairs, but never more than right now.

Bill McKibben, a founder of 350.org who teaches environmental studies at Middlebury College, is the author of the forthcoming book "Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?"

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